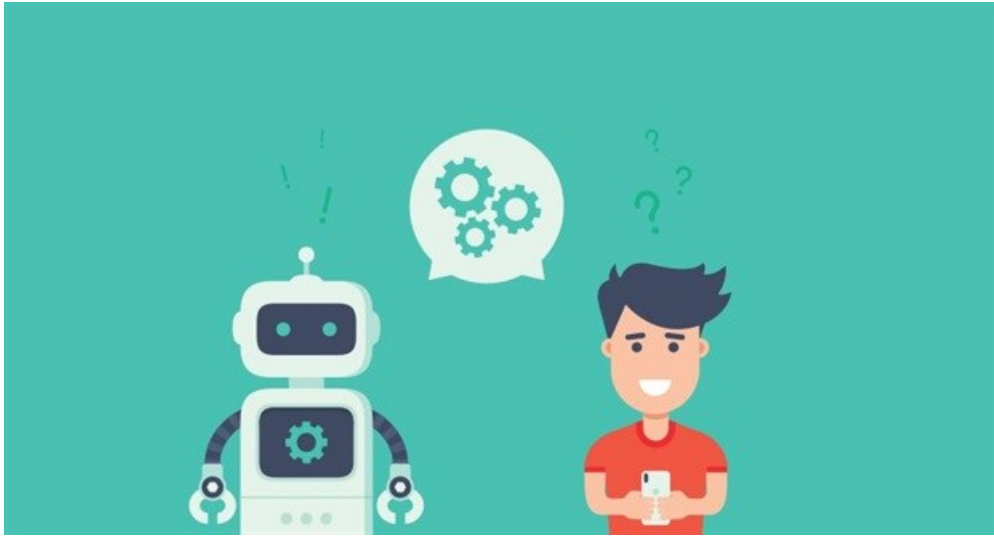


# Chatbots: Help or hindrance?

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*The answer lies in layers of content, says Emma Odendaal, Digital Director at [John Brown Media South Africa](#).*



‘Conversation commerce.’ It’s the latest buzzword in content innovation, and with good reason. Facebook Messenger supports 300,000 chatbots and customers exchange eight billion messages per day\*. We can order a product, schedule an appointment and get advice all via a conversational chatbot. But how familiar are South African consumers with this emerging tech, and are they using chatbots to help them with online purchases?

## Chatbots today

Still largely confined to the realms of customer service, these talking machines – from AI-powered versions to rudimentary decision-tree messaging apps – have alleviated pressure on call-centre staff and provided quick turnaround on basic customer queries. But ask a complex question, and chatbots run out of answers. And the conversations are just plain clumsy, if not frustrating.

Customers are increasingly familiar with emerging tech and demanding new ways of shopping. According to research done by PayPal and Ipsos in 2018, 70% of South African online browsers purchased online in 2018. But we are yet to scratch the surface of the potential of technology to deliver highly personalised, on-demand content into the palms of customers, the moment they need it most.

## Chatbots of the future

Imagine wondering what to cook, and a chatbot delivers a recipe, a wine pairing and a shopping list, then reminds you when it’s time to put on the oven – now *that’s* a bot that delivers value. It’s also personalised, meaningful and doesn’t interrupt the user experience.

The dream chatbot has a clear purpose, delivers quick, efficient communication, and balances conversation with functionality. To create this super bot, strategists require content that has sufficient depth for personalisation and well-crafted personality for brand authenticity. Layered, deep, bespoke content underpins an effective chatbot.

**So, how to get there?**

- Balance conversation with functionality.
- Choose an objective with clear purpose. Go narrow and deep or shallow and wide with your subject matter – it is impossible to be both.
- Have a personality, but don't try to be a person. Your customers know they are talking to a robot. They want simple, fast, efficient service. But, depending on the brand, they may also want the interaction to add value or offer empathy.
- Start with a simple conversation tree and add branches to the core platform as the business grows.
- Know your audience. Build rules with sensitivity to what your audience is looking for and how they intuitively navigate content.
- For efficiency, have a solid metadata and taxonomy strategy. Structure and categorise your content strategically in a way that can be used for the chatbot, but also other platforms, including voice search tech and apps.

*\*Source: Facebook, May 2018*

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